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RESEARCH

Information Labour and Shame in Farmer and Chevli's *Abortion Eve*

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This article conducts the first in-depth political-aesthetic analysis of Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli's *Abortion Eve*. In this article we argue that *Abortion Eve* uses its visual form in a way that cuts between the contexts of later forms of graphic medicine and feminist comix, and in so doing contributed to a political culture of feminist information sharing, through a self-published visual medium.

Keywords: abortion; aesthetics; comics; feminism; graphic medicine

In the 1973 shadow of the US Supreme Court's landmark legalisation of abortion, *Roe vs Wade*, Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli published their underground information comic on the termination of pregnancies, *Abortion Eve* (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973).¹ This 36-page comix, printed and distributed locally in San Francisco but advertised nationally, was designed for a reader facing the 'emotional ramifications' of abortion and strove to help women decide whether they're 'the sort of person who will want' an abortion.² While the legal timing of its publication was coincidental and part of a longer struggle for the availability of abortion even within the comix world (Fountain, 1972), with its authors 'just finishing the book when the ruling came down,' *Abortion Eve* nevertheless made a radical contribution to an underground didactic culture of feminist information-sharing and self-education that were part of the era's spirit (Farmer, 2017).

¹ We are conscious of the sensitive nature of the material with which we deal in this article and the fact that the neutrality of academic tone can appear uncaring or unsympathetic towards those with real-world experience of abortion and its prohibition. While we have done our best to handle the subject with care, we would like to pre-emptively apologise for any distress we might cause.

² We hereafter refer to *Abortion Eve* as a comix, in line with statements by Farmer (Campbell, 2013).

Thus far, the limited literature on *Abortion Eve* has sought to historicize the work, placing cultural context at the fore and situating the work within the Wimmen's Comix movement. In particular, critics such as Andrew Kunka tend to relegate Farmer and Chevli's work to the realm of "Autobiographical Comics", a familiar move when dealing with literature written by women (Kunka, 2018, p. 110), albeit one that can nonetheless be an empowering form of self-representation (Gilmore, 2000; Heilbrun, 1994).³ Despite this dearth of critical material, the prominence and visibility of *Abortion Eve* is set only to grow, as evidenced by its recent republication in an anthology with Penn State Press (Johnson and Squier, 2018).

In this article, we take a different tack to existing secondary approaches. Rather than pursuing solely the broadly autobiographical and socio-legalistic lines along which *Abortion Eve* has been chased, we instead argue that this work uses its visual form in a way that cuts between and pre-empts the contexts of later forms of graphic medicine and feminist comix. Certainly, for the authors, the aesthetic is entwined, in *Abortion Eve*, with information delivery. Created on a tight budget and self-published through their own "Nanny Goat Productions", Farmer and Chevli opt for a straightforward narrative arc that conveys information that, they believed, would be of interest to 'the typical range of women [they] would see before [them] at the clinic' that they ran (Farmer, 2017). While this plotline can often seem to take the form of soap-opera dialogue or the agony-aunt pages of a women's magazine – as characters share their personal, marital, financial, and employment details with the group (and, thereby, the reader) – medical information is also carefully imparted. Further, the melodrama and apparent cliché of this text is in keeping with the prevailing aesthetic of many underground comix of the period and should be seen through such a historicist lens.

³ It is also nonetheless undeniably true that Kunka is correct and that personal experience here played a role, although *Abortion Eve* was compiled from a range of women's experiences beyond those of the authors. That said, in 1970, Farmer's own struggle to obtain an abortion led her to experience firsthand the psychological damage caused to many women as a result of an unwanted pregnancy. Having been denied an abortion within the state of California – a psychiatric evaluation found her medically fit to be a mother – Farmer underwent what she terms the 'radicalisation' that led to *Abortion Eve*. Indeed, Farmer recalls how she had to make suicide threats in order to be taken seriously and how she 'was astounded that [she] had to prove to the state that [she] was suicidal, when all [she] wanted was an abortion, clean and safe' (Farmer, 2011).

Further, aesthetically, as we go on to argue, *Abortion Eve's* contribution to the influx of self-information assisted in deconstructing the patriarchal medical practitioner information of the 1960s and 70s, challenging and rebalancing this ownership over the creation of and access to knowledge. Indeed, *Abortion Eve's* use of the medium of the sequential narrative to relay medical information perfectly fits the criteria for a work of graphic medicine, a term coined by Ian Williams in 2007. For Williams, this sub-genre of graphic narrative contains a 'combin[ation] [of] the principles of narrative medicine with an exploration of the visual systems of comic art [to] interrogat[e] the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium' (Czerwiec et al. 2015, p. 1). Farmer and Chevli's comic, in discussing the determiners of pregnancy, such as pelvic exams and urine samples, as well as the types of abortions available based on expense and length of term, allow it to be placed as an early example of this form. In addition, the text's pro-choice stance is clear and congruent with a medical ethic of informed consent: abortion is not conveyed as the sole solution but merely one option of many, with single-parenthood and adoption also considered. *Abortion Eve* thus stands apart from the healthcare discourses of its time by working through 'the medical aspects of an abortion, and the steps one must follow to end a pregnancy safely,' as part of a visual conversation in a sequential narrative format (Farmer, 2016).

At the same time, however, *Abortion Eve's* subtexts challenge the boundaries and categorisation of graphic medicine in a way that is far more politicised than other texts within this sub-genre, particularly at its year of publication. While *Abortion Eve* can be read as a work of graphic medicine, it differs from the self-reflective graphic-medical memoirs produced in the twenty-first century, where narratives tend to be more singular and personal, rather than offering a narrative comprised of a collection of voices. Aligning itself with women's healthcare activists of the time who strove to challenge the perceptions of those who 'viewed [abortion] as a medical problem, not as a women's rights problem,' Farmer and Chevli's text argued for women's control over their own bodies and fates and thus contributed a more politicised agenda – across feminist lines – to the historical development of the graphic medicine sub-genre (Kaplan, 1997, p. 23). In expanding the discussion of abortion

from a medical to societal, legal, and political frameworks, the text offered a voice to the women who, until the Supreme Court ruling, remained 'passive victims [...] rather than active determiners of their lives' (Kaplan, 1997, p. 23). The traditions within which *Abortion Eve* works, we therefore argue, are both as a proto-form of contemporary graphic medicine, and one that is also congruent with histories of feminist knowledge creation and information sharing.

Finally, in this article we turn our focus to the aesthetic means by which Farmer and Chevli explore two focalizing themes, with reference to the intersection of graphic medicine and feminist comix: divisions of information labour and shame. Drawing on McGovern's original interview material with Farmer, it is in these areas, we contend, that *Abortion Eve's* greatest aesthetic and political contributions can be found. This piece is also the first to extend an aesthetic reading of *Abortion Eve* in relation to the work's politics and medical categorisations. Indeed, a point we wish to make is the extent to which socio-historicising readings of graphic works can tend to erase the aesthetic accomplishments of such works, unless care is taken.

***Abortion Eve* and Radical Graphic Literature of the 1970s**

Despite our desire to move beyond purely socio-historical approaches, before we turn to our thematic and aesthetic analyses, it remains nonetheless necessary to give a brief contextual background to the material circumstances that led to the publication of *Abortion Eve*. By way of synopsis, the text follows the individual journeys of five women who meet at an abortion clinic, from their initial appointment to the termination itself. While the characters are homogenised by the fact that their names are all derived from "Eve" (Evelyn, Eve, Evita etc.), the comix takes great pains to depict an unwanted pregnancy as something that can affect all women regardless of age, race and socio-economic background. This diversity (demonstrated from the very beginning on the front page of the publication, as per **Figure 1**) can be seen in the fact that Evelyn, Eve, and Evita are already mothers, working professionals and are white, Black and Hispanic respectively, while they also reflect a demographic of older women seeking abortion.



Figure 1: Front cover from *Abortion Eve* by Joyce Farmer & Lyn Chevli, published by Nanny Goat Productions (1973).

Though the women are given different reasons for finding themselves at the clinic, the three older women express mental and financial inability to raise further children. Conversely, the two younger characters, Eva and Evie, could not be further apart in terms of their reasoning for attending the clinic. The former, a wayward white hippy, casually nods to the era's carefree counterculture and finds the unwanted

pregnancy an infringement of her freedom and independence. On the other hand, Evie highlights the conflict faced by young Catholics who are doubly shamed both by their pregnancy and the sin they feel is committed in its termination. The Christian religious implications are further highlighted by the naming of the clinic's counsellor as Mary Multipary, not only a recurrent character from Farmer and Chevli's *Tits & Clits*, but also carrying a distinct resonance of Mary Magdalene (Kunka, 2018, pp. 109–110).⁴

Indeed, having mentioned *Tits & Clits*, Farmer and Chevli's existing role within comix culture cannot be overlooked. At the time of *Abortion Eve*'s publication, the pair were already part of the West Coast's expanding underground comix scene and had released the first issue of their comix series *Tits & Clits* in 1972. After the self-publication of its first three issues through Nanny Goat Productions, *Tits & Clits* went on to have a successful 15 year run as a joint publication with Last Gasp (Farmer, 2017; Goldberg, 1994, p. 17, note 2).

Concurrently, however, the comics scene at the time was one of abject misogynistic violence towards women. Farmer and Chevli's material explicitly retaliated against 'the absolutely violent misogyny [inherent] in underground comix [...] where women are raped and murdered and their body parts are scattered across the [comic] landscape,' by turning themselves from subject (or victim) to creator

⁴ The pair were also, by this point, no strangers to controversy. In 1973, *Tits & Clits* faced an obscenity charge from Oretta Sears of the Orange County Police Department for what was considered its pornographic content. While the Miller vs California Supreme Court case (Supreme Court of the United States of America, 1973) redefined obscenity, distinguishing it from baseness and 'appeal[ing] to prurient interests' and changing it instead to a consideration of 'whether the work taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value,' (DeKeseredy and Corsianos, 2015, pp. 29–30) *Tits & Clits*'s inclusion of nudity, which remained prohibited by the Revised 1971 Comics Code, led to the work remaining labelled pornographic and obscene, in spite of its satirical and political content. In addition to this, collusion to sell comix characterised as pornographic resulted in the arrest of Gordon and Evie Wilson, owners of the Laguna Beach bookstore, Fahrenheit 451, for stocking the supposedly pornographic *Tits & Clits* issues (Vanesian, 2011). Thus as a way 'mainly to assuage consumers – and cops' *Abortion Eve* and feminist short story collection *Pandora's Box*, which followed later in the year, were issued as one-off, sister companion pieces to *Tits & Clits*; their arguably more covert titles – at least in the case of *Pandora's Box* – allowing Farmer and Chevli's joint venture to continue production after the threats of prosecution for obscenity (Vanesian, 2011).

(Campbell, 2013). Initially the co-authors wished to produce more of a “‘get even” kind of violence’ within their comix: essentially *Zap* for women (Mavrides et al. 2014).⁵ However they both soon ‘realised that neither of [them] wanted to put that kind of violence in’ *Tits & Clits* and felt themselves ‘incapable of it’ (Farmer, 2017).

Following this approach, Farmer and Chevli turned not to the inverse of misogynistic violence, but instead used the threatening status of the female body and menstrual blood to challenge a male readership. Farmer states of *Tits & Clits* that:

‘We ended up doing a different kind of violence it turned out, although we didn’t think so at the time, which was dealing with menstrual blood and mentioning menstruation and birth control and things men didn’t seem to think about *at all* at that time’ (Campbell, 2013).

In this way, Farmer and Chevli moved from explicit violence on the page to the perceived threat to masculinity from the female body. This itself centres around the idea that ‘the experience of knowing oneself’ – perhaps in both the implied terms of masturbatory experience but also as a broader precept of female bodily self-knowledge – should be considered ‘shameful, as an abject existence that is messy and disgusting’ (Young, 2005, p. 109). Lauren B Wilcox however, considers the macrocosmic effects of these perceptions of what we can term menstrual violence. Through Kristeva’s abjection theory and a complex interplay of self/other and internal/external, she sees ‘menstrual blood [as invoking] the maternal body as the ultimate threat to individual [female] autonomy’ (Wilcox, 2015, p. 98). Looking outside of the body then, to the implications and repercussions of female sex, Farmer draws a perhaps troubling attention to the fact that the threat of an unwanted pregnancy, this ‘different kind of violence’, is a violence against not only women’s bodies, but also, in wider socio-political terms, is a violence against their freedom and liberation.

⁵ *Zap Comix* is an underground comix series created in 1968 by Robert Crumb. His work, in spite of its exaggeratedly grotesque graphiation/style, marked him as one of the founding fathers of the male underground comix scene. Beyond his style, Crumb utilised the medium as a ‘tool for social critique’, something which the Revised Comics Code of 1971 reflected.

Abortion Eve succinctly sums up this predicament – that women's bodies are both threatening to men but also a threat to women themselves – in the two panels shown below (**Figure 2**) that highlight motherhood's restrictions on freedom. The two women featured are both already mothers in the narrative, hence their opinion is supposed to be informed by incontestable prior experience. Evelyn in the left-hand panel exclaims 'you never have a moment's freedom!' and appears harried at the prospect of a life where 'the simplest trip to the grocery store has to be planned like a military campaign!' Meanwhile, Eve in the right panel, with her focused gaze and pursed lips, expresses a determination to be in charge of her life and her future. Her mind is decided and she will not be swayed in her decision, thus her statement; 'the moment you decide not to have an abortion, that kid is going to determine your life' becomes a surety rather than a possibility.

The constraining implications of these panels are highlighted by the background shading at the top of each image. Resembling horizontal imprisoning bars that grow denser as they move away from the speakers, the frame also entirely contains the female characters, giving a sense of claustrophobia. Indeed, the framing of the women in head and shoulder shots mimics the well-known arrest "mug-shot"



Figure 2: Two panels from *Abortion Eve* by Joyce Farmer & Lyn Chevli, published by Nanny Goat Productions (1973: 15).

formulation, thereby also gesturing towards incarceration. At the same time, the callout elements overlap into the gutter, implying that dialogue and information sharing among women – the key aspects of *Abortion Eve* – are able to transcend the female captivity that unwanted pregnancy engenders. That women's speech should do graphic damage in bursting the frame is another form of alternative, retributive, and just violence against socio-carceral-corporeal systems explored by the comic, here embodied in the female speech act and that we will shortly link to paradigms of labour and shame. It is also notable, in these frames, that the women's figures displace the background shading with distinct spacing around the characters. This at once summons both the religiosity of the halo, thereby again sacrilegiously playing on the biblical resonances of the text's eponymous figures, while also bestowing an agency upon the speaking figures, whose words float above the "bars".

Gendered Divisions of Information Labour and Knowledge Creation

If the timing and context of *Abortion Eve*'s release was crucial, this social milieu is most textually pronounced in the work's breakdown of gendered divisions of labour, particularly around the gatekeeping of medical information. At a time when 'very little information on women's bodies or abortion had been produced for lay readers' (Kline, 2010, p. 71), the text aimed to speak on a personal, singular level to women who required information regarding abortion. For instance, the characters discuss a pelvic examination, noting that 'a pelvic examination is when the doctor examines your "inside" female parts' (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 5); there is a conversation about local and general anaesthesia (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 8); an explanation of the cervix (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 8); notes on the psychological counselling service (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 9); warnings about blood clots (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 12); a discussion about sterilisation (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 13); a section on anaemia (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 22); a panel on the RhoGam shot (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 27); and even information on blood pressure after an

abortion (Chevli and Farmer, 1973, p. 28). Indeed, the *medical information sharing* of *Abortion Eve* is absolutely central to the text.

In addition, though, of course, from at least one feminist perspective 'abortion [was seen] as integrally linked to the advancement of women and their liberation from traditional roles' (Doerflinger, 2004, p. 50). Farmer and Chevli's comix brings these issues to the fore, challenging on a wider scale the restriction to knowledge women faced regarding their bodies by providing access to this information in a visual and accessible format. Indeed, Joyce Farmer speaks of 'the whiff of self-information in the air!' in the years preceding and after *Abortion Eve*'s distribution (Farmer, 2017). Self-information became a legitimate form of knowledge sharing, challenging the creation of and access to information, and arguably provided the blueprint from which today's contemporary works of graphic medicine have been shaped.

Certainly, organisations such as Jane (the Abortion Counselling Service of Women's Liberation), which was initially based in Chicago, had already begun this important reclamation of the knowledge-creation narrative seen in *Abortion Eve*. Laura Kaplan, a former member of the group, charts the reach of the service in *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service*. Recounting its growth from a handful of women offering advice and recommending abortionists via a telephone helpline to becoming a full-time underground operation, Jane challenged not only the patriarchal decision makers – physicians and psychiatrists, of abortion – but went some way towards subverting the very labour roles of those performing the abortion procedures. Jane's work highlighted that while 'part of the criticism was that the [medical] profession was dominated by men, [...] part of the solution offered by the movement was women-controlled health services' (Weisman, 1998, p. 76) which saw Jane, towards the end of their underground operation, teaching women to learn and perform abortion procedures, and aftercare themselves (for more, see Kaplan, 1997).

While the Jane Collective's subversion of the patriarchal doctrine surrounding abortion did much to challenge the male dominance of the medical profession, access to knowledge and the very creation of that knowledge was also challenged.

Though the quantitative success of the women's alternative healthcare movement can be seen in the figure of 11,000 successful abortions performed by Jane during their underground operation (Kaplan, 1997, p. xx), Joanne Leonard cites the more qualitative art of storytelling and the sharing of women's experiences as a central aspect of the movement. Indeed, she states that '[t]he general idea was to create a gathering of voices and visions that would make the unmentionable, and unseen, a part of a shared conversation, part of the visual universe' (Leonard, 2014, p. 89). This assertion directly relates to women's creation of knowledge, of which Wendy Kline speaks in *Bodies of Knowledge*. She notes that the feminist activism of the 1970s looked not only towards allowing women 'access to information about their bodies [but argued that] they should also help to *create* this knowledge' (Kline, 2010, p. 3).

Abortion Eve bridges this absence not only of access to the abortion procedure, but to the very information regarding abortion and reproduction that would help inform women's decision-making processes but that was dominated by men. The opening pages of the work make this clear in the form of a faux-advertising prologue. Reminiscent of the tones of 1950s advertising targeted at housewives, thereby implying that there have been few advances in the subsequent decades, Farmer and Chevli use curlicue fonts and a personal, conversational tone (shown in **Figure 3**) to satirically "target" women as their "readership" in the advertising prologue. Notably, however, for the authors, pro-choice does not here mean pro-abortion. Abortion is not advertised as a singular cure to the financial, familial, or marital problems the women discuss, nor is it represented as a solution to an unwanted pregnancy. In this sense, their material adheres to the so-called "rational" school of advertising popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereby 'advertisers [appealed] to people's reasoning capacity' (Zuckerman, 1998, p. 66), thereby giving at least the semblance of free, rational choice.

Other comics on abortion have deployed similar techniques that can be situated within the history of the advertising industry. For instance, the turn of the century saw a move away from the visibility of the advert toward its psychological 'use of suggestion and persuasion' (Zuckerman, 1998, p. 66), a manipulation employed by the

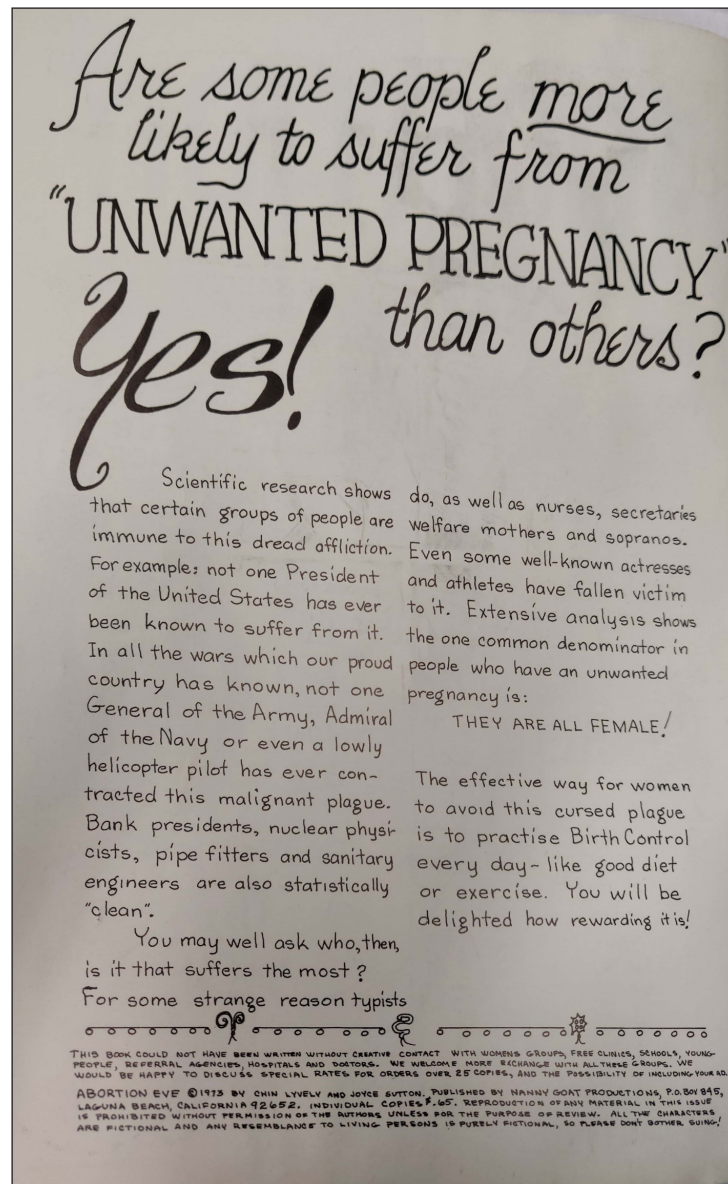


Figure 3: Preface, *Abortion Eve* by Joyce Farmer & Lyn Chevli, published by Nanny Goat Productions (1973).

pro-life comic, *Who Killed Junior?* Produced by Abilene's Right-to-Life Committee in 1973, discussed further in the shame section of this chapter. This shift can be seen in this context by the move away from advertising abortion to the indirect focus on labour equity and birth control.

However, much of the linguistic humour applied to this preface works on the distinction between gendered professions with Farmer and Chevli differentiating between men and women based on stereotyped divisions of labour and, of course, underpinned by structural, legally enforced segregation of women from these fields of work.⁶ Indeed, the co-authors outline those professions and institutions from which women found themselves relegated: as President of the United States, General of the Army, Admiral of the Navy and so on. These, we note, are all (stereo-) typically male professions without ever relying on the adjective “male” to illustrate this point. Similarly, those female gendered professions outlined are not only devoid of the patriarchal leadership denoted in the first examples but also adhere to those stereotyped feminine characteristics such as the carer, the empath, the assistant: these are the ‘nurses, secretaries, welfare mothers’ whom Farmer and Chevli list. These heavily stereotyped divisions of labour serve, of course, further to satirise the advertising styles of the 1950s onwards, which ‘rel[ied] heavily on crude, easily recognisable stereotypes [in which] women were shown predominantly in the home (indeed in the kitchen or bathroom); depicted as housewives and mothers; they were frequently shown in dependent or subservient roles’ (Gill, 2009, p. 418).

Although, as Heidi Hartmann notes from an overly essentialist 1976 perspective that demonstrates a common belief from the time, ‘[t]he division of labour by sex appears to have been universal throughout human history’, it is curious that Farmer and Chevli should choose the gendered division of *labour* as their way of highlighting femininity (Hartmann, 1976). The decision is anchored, though, once more, in the realms of knowledge production and bodily power explored by the early Foucault: the patriarchal medical establishment. For ‘nurses’ is listed as a specifically female profession, even while ‘doctors’ are absent from the list for both men and women. This can also be seen when one considers the influential intertext for *Abortion Eve*, the 1971 co-authored feminist tract *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and the texts

⁶ These stereotypes are of course based on socially constructed notions of what is the acceptable behaviour denoting a specific gender, and have also helped in constructing what were seen as traditional labour roles for men and women. However, the Women's Rights Movement and texts such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* urged women to search for themselves outside of the stereotyped role of womanhood which dictated caregiver and mother as the only options.

that Farmer considers generically similar. Playing into the political and activist traditions of 'nothing about us, without us', popularised by the later 1990s disability movements, Farmer recalls her copy alongside many of the other self-information pamphlets circulating at the time:

'We adored *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. My \$0.35 copy seems to have pre-dated *Abortion Eve*, but at this time I can't remember whether I read it before doing *Abortion Eve*. I also have a VD Handbook and Circle One Self Health Handbook, both from Canada, both paper, both seem to [have been] published slightly after *Abortion Eve*. I even have a handbook on DIY abortion from the same era' (Farmer, 2017).

Indeed, the cultural milieu within which *Abortion Eve* can be situated was ripe with sources that focus on the male-dominated medical profession. For instance, consider photographer Abigail Heyman's mixed media project *Growing Up Female: A Personal Photojournal* (1974). This project captures womanhood's many stages, from young girls playing with dolls and prams to six teenage girls at what appears to be a beauty pageant, a cheerleader embracing a boyfriend, and an older woman lying at the beach. Much of what Heyman depicts adheres to the stereotypes of womanhood and divisions of labour mentioned above as well as snippets of text which reflect the unease with which women are cast into these roles. This is encapsulated by two images that sit side by side: women rummaging through piles of clothes and fabric underneath a sign reading 'LINGERIE'; juxtaposed with an image of suited men, on their daily commute, striding through an unnamed city. Heyman questions what it means to be a woman, and though her photojournal comprises only a few short sentences to accompany her myriad images, she expresses the joy of knowing oneself: 'In a women's gynaecological self-help group. I got to know my body – and myself – better. Have you ever looked at your cervix?' she asks, as the reader is presented with an image of four women regarding the body of another. Equally captured is the shame with which women perceive their bodies, as if through the male gaze. Set beside an image of childbirth she writes, 'At first I didn't want my husband in

the delivery room because I didn't want him to see me exposed. And I was afraid he would never make love with me again.' This statement is almost in contradiction to that which accompanies perhaps the most harrowing image (**Figures 4 and 5** below showing a comparative view) of Heyman herself undergoing an abortion, in which she states, 'Nothing ever made me feel more like a sex object than going through an abortion alone' (Vitello, 2013).

Heyman's image captures the photographer's emotionally and physically vulnerable position while undergoing a dilation and curettage abortion (for more, see Leonard, 2014, p. 89). In spite of this vulnerability, which places her below the near faceless man in surgeon's scrubs, there is a power conveyed in the image which is transmitted through its very capturing of the abortion procedure. In documenting the termination of her pregnancy Heyman regains control and ownership of the act from the male doctor carrying out the procedure. There is a partial facelessness to the abortion procedure conveyed by the nondescript room, anonymous surgeon, and similarly faceless Heyman. Indeed the only part of Heyman that the reader sees are her legs, and as the reader lies with Heyman, submissive to the patriarchal practitioner carrying out the abortion, the reader becomes both the faceless women who

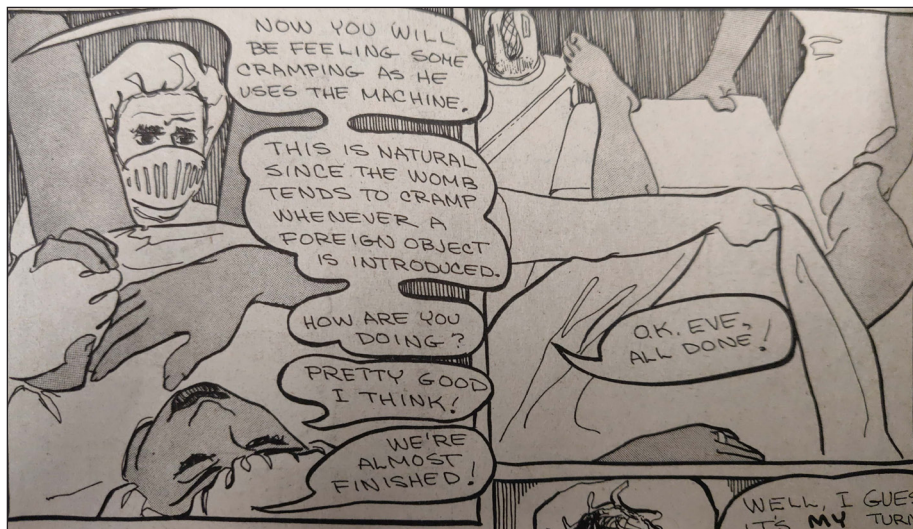


Figure 4: Juxtaposed perspective with *Abortion Eve* by Joyce Farmer & Lyn Chevli, published by Nanny Goat Productions (1973: 26).

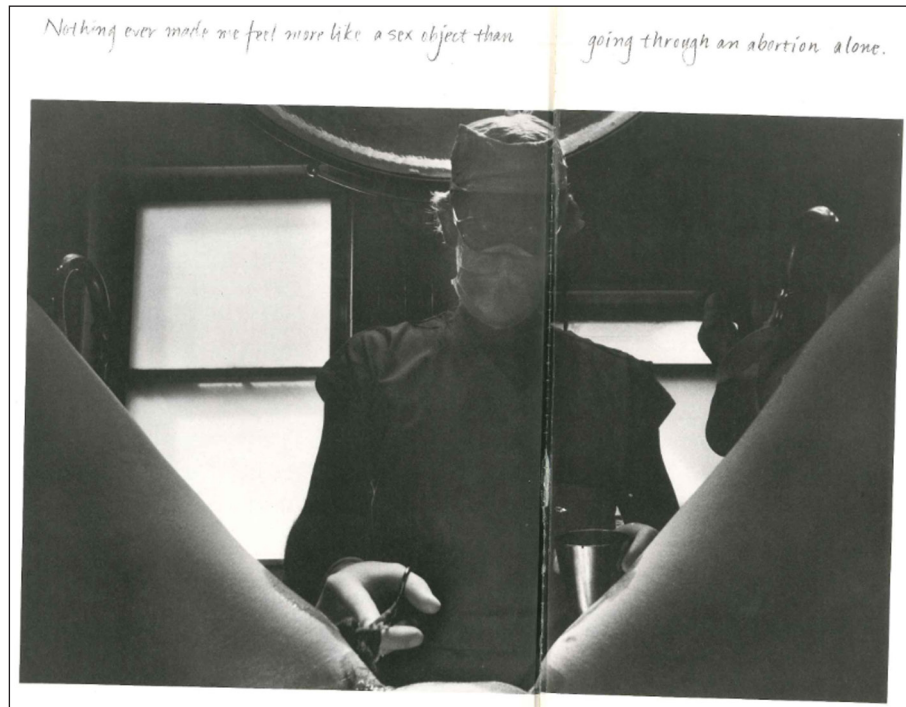


Figure 5: Abigail Heyman undergoing an abortion (Heyman, 1974: 72–3).

undergo abortions, yet also united with a common condition of womanhood. The sinister *contra-jour* backlighting, rendering the surgeon featureless, perhaps coincidentally recalls the historic act of blindfolding women who underwent illegal abortions; a move designed to protect the identity of the medical professional. In images like these, Heyman becomes both the subject of the image and also the documenter of this intimate, uncomfortable and taboo situation. In capturing this image and sharing it publicly in a printed photo journal, Heyman regains ownership over her body through the perspective of the image.

As can be seen from the comparative images from *Abortion Eve* in **Figure 4**, Heyman's image resonates strongly. The different approach that Farmer and Chevli take, though, is to reintroduce Eve's face into the frame. Indeed, the perspectival difference is subtle but profound. In addition to giving Eve that most-Levinasian feature for the recognition of the other – the face – in this panel in *Abortion Eve*, the surgeon is nonetheless still male. In this sense, the text interpellates the reader into

a new, quasi-space of agency, one in which Eve is re-personified – and thereby given more power – while she is still perhaps less active than the photographic agent in Heyman's image whose subversion lies in the documentation. Certainly, the following panel shows a similar perspective to Heyman's image, but the actual procedural frame is drawn from slightly above. This has the extra effect of reducing the intimacy of the encounter since it is then as though there is a hovering additional person in the room, the omniscient perspectivizing character of *Abortion Eve*. Of course, the loss of intimacy here is not necessarily a negative; an aspect intensified by the following panel where three pairs of hands are visible. It can instead be read as a statement of female solidarity; a proliferation of comforting co-presences on 'A•Day'. Indeed, the reader is interpellated into the position of solidarity here; there is a hand holding Eve's that could just as well be the viewer's own.

Texts such as *Abortion Eve*, *Growing Up Female* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, as examples of women's literature and collective experience sharing, highlighted the need for a transparency and openness surrounding the discussion of abortion. Their creation and distribution of knowledge alleviated the stigma surrounding the subject, and at least within women's circles removed the frame through which society was taught to perceive it as shameful and taboo. Articles and published guidelines on access to abortion which ran in popular women's magazines well before *Roe vs. Wade*, 'advis[ed] readers of the various regulations in place as well as the pending legislative and judicial actions in progress across the country' and were similarly instrumental in educating and discussing the still-shamed subject (Hinnant, 2016, p. 233). The primary means by which these texts worked was in questioning the male-driven authority of a patriarchal medical labour establishment, through the circulation of information. However, the feelings of shame ordinarily associated with abortion were also being challenged by these new modes of communication.

Abortion, Shame, and Religion

The historical and cultural background to *Abortion Eve* foregrounds the link between sexuality and shame and the ways in which comix such as *Tits & Clits* worked to move away from a shaming culture to one in which women's sexuality was celebrated.

For, as Megan Tagle Adams puts it, 'women have traditionally been positioned as sexual gatekeepers – as bearers of respectability and morality responsible for tempering men's urges,' highlighting the ways in which unwanted pregnancy as careless and promiscuous has been portrayed (Adams, 2016, p. 230). The interlinking of the shame which stems from seeking an abortion, as well as the shame of the sexual act from which it is resultant, are conveyed and critiqued with equal importance in *Abortion Eve*.

Abortion Eve's characters aesthetically represent shame in a variety of ways, most commonly by acting out the visual embodiment of the word's origins. As Elspeth Probyn notes, 'etymologically *shame* comes from the Goth word *sham*, which refers to covering the face' (Probyn, 2010, p. 72). Similarly, the Indo-European root traces shame to a form of concealment, linking the word's origins to the act of covering, veiling, or hiding (Mitra, 2013, p. 201). Within *Abortion Eve* it is the character of Evie, a sixteen-year-old Catholic, who most obviously displays the shame experienced by an unwanted pregnancy and the seeking of abortion, but the narrative in general features many instances of hidden female faces to indicate shame. In a similar fashion to the recent lexical contractions demonstrated by Andrew Piper (Piper, 2018, pp. 42–65), there is also a substantial reduction in the number of veiled female faces as the work progresses, moving from nine instances in 'The Rap' – with a series of four pages in a row containing hidden faces – to only five in 'A•Day'. This seems a clear signal of the text's belief in the power of information-sharing to alleviate shame.

Best represented by the right-hand panel in **Figure 6**, in which a lone Evie is captured, she covers her face with her hands, thus hiding it from view and in this way acts out the origins of shame in her concealment. For while shame is an emotional response, it here manifests physically and aesthetically; '[It] is experienced first in the body, is expressed on the surface of the body [...] and can become embodied, stored in our cells and held in habitual gestures', as Miryam Clough puts it (Clough, 2017, p. 79). Evie's physical embodiment of shame can also be seen to mark itself as evidence of her 'shame-saturated relationship to [her] physicality' (Johnson and Moran, 2013, p. 10), and her sexual shame around her pregnancy, leading to the



Figure 6: Evie hides her face in shame, *Abortion Eve* by Joyce Farmer & Lyn Chevli, published by Nanny Goat Productions (1973: 2).

concealment of both her body and identity. Shame as experienced by Evie is a double-edged sword: her body is both the vessel of her shame and the canvas on which her emotional response to it is displayed. The whiteness of her hair, hands and clothing stand in stark contrast to the heavily lined darkness of the panel's background and are indicative of Evie's youth and naivety, while the darkness seems to close in around her as she becomes overwhelmed with negative thoughts. Further, vocal call-outs at this point are used to obscure the character's face, demonstrating the ways in which information and knowledge-sharing cultures are contingent and context dependent; they can free or shame.

Within *Abortion Eve*, Farmer's graphiation – a term coined by Philippe Marion to denote the visual style of a comic (or comix) artist, their distinctive use of colours, lines and contours (for more, see Kukkonen, 2013, p. 172) – signifies the alienation and loneliness of shame; its individuating characteristic despite its societal nature. As such, Farmer's graphiation consistently pairs bold lines with simplistic and scratchy backgrounds, allowing the women's faces, which more often than not are visually rendered alone, to speak for themselves, when visible. It is not just Evie who appears by herself in these panels; each of the five women are given their own panels through which their emotional loneliness and isolation is conveyed through their singular portrayal. Yet what Farmer expresses here is that no matter how much

one perceives themselves to be alone, the concerns and perceptions imparted by each of these women are shared collectively. Evie's exclamation 'I don't know what to do...', married mother Evita stating 'I don't want my old man to find out I was here!' and potentially influencing her decision, or Eva resigning herself to pregnancy as a form of punishment for intercourse, 'I've done a bad thing! I've gotta pay for it! I think I'd better go ahead and have the baby!', represent the worries of many women harbouring unwanted pregnancies and private shame.

Interestingly, Farmer's illustrations, while depicting Evie in white against a dark background, inversely mirror Marcia Cohen's observations of media representations and coverage of women who have undergone a termination. Cohen notes that both then, in the 1970s, as in the late 1980s of her book's publication, women's profiles are projected anonymously and are consistently 'cast in deep shadow' (Cohen, 1988, pp. 177–8). Whether the concealment of identity is the personal preference of the woman or an aesthetic choice of broadcasters, the shame of abortion is nevertheless reinforced through the trope of facial hiding. Indeed, Cohen shows the parallel with media representations of drug addicts or paid informants. The media silhouetting and concealment of the face can be seen as a private acting out of shame projected on a large scale, as a way to protect the viewing public (or society), who is not yet ready to allow abortion to be visible, discussed or accepted as a viable option. Indeed, Claire Pajczkowska and Ivan Ward's notion that to 'feel shame when we are completely exposed, conscious of being looked at and not ready to be visible' speaks on a larger, societal scale here (Pajczkowska and Ward, 2008, p. 77). It is society that is not yet ready to grant the social issue of abortion visibility that is shown in *Abortion Eve*. At the same time, Farmer and Chevli invert the shame hierarchy with their masked surgeon, mentioned above. In displacing the etymological face-hiding aspect onto the male doctor, there is an implied reversal of the traditional shame hierarchy that is elsewhere explored in the work.

Yet, shame in *Abortion Eve* comes with a very particular context; tensions between Catholicism and various schools of feminism. This is, of course, a widespread and well-known phenomenon (or even cultural bias). Indeed, such is this societal bias

that it can often be difficult to be able 'to view abortion outside of Catholicism' (Weingarten, 2016, p. 30), a trap into which *Abortion Eve* could be said to fall.

Indeed, with *Abortion Eve* released only a decade after the myriad cultural upheavals of the 1960s, Luke Timothy Johnson locates the era as the point at which American Catholicism became more widely accepted and integrated, simply stating that 'American Catholics truly became American at a moment when America itself was undergoing a cultural revolution' (Johnson, 2004, p. 31). Conversely, Catholics who disagreed with the Federal legalisation of abortion as well as the procedure outright, demonstrate how intrinsically abortion, religion and politics are intertwined in American life, as those who viewed themselves as pro-life were politically 'driven into the waiting arms of the Republican Party, where abortion was combined with other 'social conservative' issues', in Richard M. Doerflinger's words (Doerflinger, 2004, p. 52).

This conflict is something that Farmer and Chevli hoped to convey through their text. Joyce Farmer recalls that:

'Neither Lyn [Chevli] or I were Catholic and we had been impressed that so many young Catholic women had adopted the church teachings about the sanctity of life without question, and that these teachings would be something they had to re-consider in light of their currently pregnant status' (Farmer, 2017).

Farmer identifies the Catholic Church as 'the main organisation in America that was against the use of birth control' at the time of *Abortion Eve*'s creation, and therefore she and Chevli felt it important to 'include a discussion of religious conflict in the [comix]'. This conflict is explicitly captured in the character of Evie who appears to represent 'many of the women [Farmer and Chevli] counselled [who] were heavily conflicted by the teachings of the church regarding their pregnancies.' **Figure 6** indeed indicates the way in which personal and religious opposition is tackled, both visually and textually, in *Abortion Eve*. While readers note that Evie's heart shaped face, long blonde hair and pale complexion reinforce her youth they also ironically

allude to a virginal purity, something we know as readers to be untrue but that nonetheless restores a parodic vision of the male image of sanctity. By leaning on traditional and religious representations of shamed women, Farmer and Chevli both mimic and satirise the standardised depiction of shame. Similarly visualising this conflict, and linking back to religion, is Evie's crucifix earring, seen dangling from her right ear and to the left of the panel. While this jewellery distinguishes her, it also pigeonholes her, removing her autonomy in the situation and linking judgement of the ethics of abortion to the strictures of her faith. Notably, the crucifix only appears with any prominence at the point where Evie covers her face.

One need only observe the way in which access to abortion was tackled by Abilene's Right-to-Life Committee, responsible for the production of the *Who Killed Junior?* Pro-life graphic pamphlets in 1973, shortly after *Roe vs. Wade*. As seen in, **Figure 7**, this work depicts the cartoonish three-month-old fetus of "Junior" standing up in the womb, in opposition to the medical accuracy and self-help expressed in *Abortion Eve*. As noted by Ian Williams, 'the lovable cartoon baby [is] living, apparently independent and without the need of an umbilical cord, inside a voluminous triangular shape – an abstract representation of the womb' (Williams, 2015, p. 71) and woman in a fabricated world which serves only to push the pro-life group's agenda.

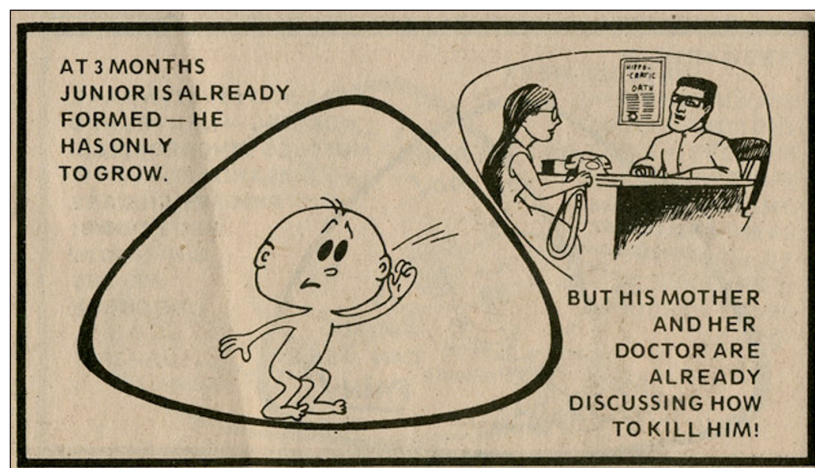


Figure 7: Page 9, *Who Killed Junior?* By Right-to-Life Committee, published by Right-to-Life (1973: 9).

Similarly, cutesy Junior's visual depiction is juxtaposed with language suggesting that mother and male practitioner (also seen in the panel) are 'already discussing how to kill him!' The implicating and pointed language of *Who Killed Junior?*'s panels serve to draw a purposeful link between pro-choice and murder.

Yet, it is also important to note that the shame-generation here finds its obverse mirror in *Abortion Eve*. Again turning to **Figure 6** above, consider that the feelings of shame are accompanied by the threat of male violence and murder. Evie explicitly uses the phrase 'My father will **kill** me', which, regardless of how seriously one takes it, linguistically brings the murder of women by men into the frame. It is, indeed, an accountability of shame as the face of male violence and femicide that drives *Abortion Eve*'s powerful medical and feminist retort to the discourse found in works such as *Who Killed Junior?*

Conclusion

In this article, we have advanced the first comparative analysis of the aesthetics of Farmer and Chevli's *Abortion Eve*, using original interview material for supplementary context. Locating the work between the underground comix scene and the women's information-healthcare movement, *Abortion Eve* sought not only to empower women through its knowledge-production function, but also aimed to position the comic as a serious form that was nonetheless accessible to a wide sector of society. This was not always easy. As Farmer, acknowledged, '[t]he comic form in America has suffered much from being "for children" or "not serious literature." Whatever we created had to buck the dismissive attitude toward the comic form and deal with criticism that we were disloyal to feminists for exposing some serious women's issues' (Farmer, 2017).

Yet, in considering its function as a pre-runner of contemporary graphic medicine alongside its self-published nature, *Abortion Eve* centres itself as an extremely early graphic medical herstory. This deconstruction of the contributors to information mark *Abortion Eve* as a significant milestone in the development of both underground comix, the rise of self-information and the growth of the graphic medium as a platform for intimate, personal narratives, thus allowing future, challenging,

and controversial issues to be acknowledged and shared. *Abortion Eve* is, therefore, an important text not only for its political resonances, but also for its medical intersections. Farmer and Chevli, working within sex-positive traditions, show how complex political entanglements structure the ways in which information can be shared between women. In particular, we have examined here how a visual aesthetic of shame running through the work – and couched in etymological terms of hiding the face – forms an important touchstone for the more medically-oriented portions of the text.

Abortion Eve remains a relatively under-studied work. Yet, in this piece we have argued that such works – usually confined to specific genre brackets – should be taken seriously as aesthetic artforms, as political tracts, and as imparters of medical information. For as the personal remains ever political, *Abortion Eve* shows us the ways in which solidarity and information sharing through graphic media can empower.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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